Bacon is Better, So is the Price

By Capt. Harry Kingsley

BRITAIN REDISCOVERED

UNLESS ONE HAS some special reason, sentimental or otherwise, for making the journey, it is not really a very sensible thing to come over here to Britain in the fall or winter, and comfort-loving North Americans would be well advised to choose another season.

From all accounts, however, last summer was only slightly better, and so far as we were concerned, we wished to spend one more Christmas in England and to see how we would react to living conditions during their worst season. It would also give us an early start for the Continent.

I am afraid that I must have grown soft, or else forgotten what it was really like over here, for at the ripe old age of 58 I somehow no longer enjoy this huddling about an open fire with the draughts whistling behind your back. And then there is all this business of hot water bottles in the beds; not that I despise the things, they can be most comforting, but it would be so much nicer if they were not necessary.

On the whole it is best to stay in a hotel that boasts of central heating, and this can easily be discovered by reference to the Hotel Keepers' Guide. Even so, you may be in for a surprise. There was one inn that put us up for a couple of weeks and boasted of this, but I am bound to confess that the heating was not very apparent, until we looked carefully around the room. A single pipe ran furtively across one end of the place before disappearing beneath a washstand. However it was still an improvement whenever they remembered to stoke the furnace. Mind you, this particular inn was built around 1450, and so some allowance had to be made for the historical atmosphere . . .

We landed in Liverpool next to a dock where an ammunition ship had been blown up during the bombing. The officials were most friendly, but not in the least hurried. It is this attitude to life that strikes you first, for over here everything seems to be run at a slower pace with the possible exception of the trains), but then perhaps living is more gracious.

TIME'S A-WASTIN'

This outlook can be more than a trifle tedious, however, for those attempting to transact business. For example, when I was in a great hurry to make final arrangements to pick up the new car (an operation which had already taken most of three hours) I occupied my time by dropping into Gieves in Bond Street, and the man there kept me waiting whilst he slowly wrote out a bill and told me a long and involved story of how another person had been in a dreadful hurry only the other day. Quite a coincidence!

Should you be picking up a new car over here, as we did, it would pay you to bring along your car insurance forms, if you have any, for you can save 10, 15 or even 20 per cent by having a policy showing one, two or three years accident free. Of course I had no such papers to show, not having been told, and it cost me about £42 for one year (three months of which can be on the continent).

IN LONDON the railings are back in the parks, the statues have all been given some sort of dark coat of paint and many of the buildings are cleaner for the soot having been removed. Bomb damage is no longer apparent, and it is necessary nowadays to know where to look for it—except around St. Paul's, but even there a lot of new office buildings are taking shape. (Remember, they discovered a Roman mosaic when clearing the debris?) Somehow one gets the impression that a more cheerful outlook is abroad among the gallant people of this indomitable little island.

Another first impression was the dreadful noise in Liverpool's Lime Street Station. I had entirely forgotten that it was almost impossible to make oneself heard in such places. The elderly German-American gentleman, who had been with us in the Duivendyk, got so confused that he promptly lost his ticket to London as soon as he had purchased it, and had to buy another. He found the original in his monocle case later, and the train conductor could not have been more polite or helpful.

Capt. Harry Kingsley, RCN (Rtd.), whose home is in Victoria, is travelling in Great Britain and The Continent with Mrs. Kingsley, and has already contributed a series to The Islander covering that portion of their trip by sea, through the Panama and the Caribbean to Liverpool. In the accompanying article and a second to follow he rediscovers England and some of the loveliness of Wales.

The speed of the express train amazed our American friends, but it was noticeable that the roadbed was still not up to pre-war standards. Lunch was something of a problem. Much is being done these days, however, to improve the service, new diesels are appearing daily, and fresh rolling stock replacing the old.

Walking in the streets of the crowded little towns is at first a somewhat nerve-wracking experience for the uninitiated. The side-walks are only slightly raised, and owing to the narrowness of the roads the busy traffic goes roaring by within touch of your elbow.

Even the smaller towns are crowded with people these days in England and I noticed, when walking down Oxford Street in London, that pedestrians were constantly stepping out into that crowded thoroughfare, where the streams of double-decker buses brushed their coat sleeves in passing.

The first place we chose to stay in Essex was an old inn named the White Hart, in the small town of Witham. Bed and an English breakfast for £1 per day per person ($2.70) and the first thing that struck us was the superior quality of the bacon. Another pleasing feature was the price, when we inquired at a butcher's shop. It worked out to about 40c a pound, and that is about half our price in Canada. The same seemed to apply to most of the staple articles, although there are certain glaring exceptions, such as gasoline, tobacco, cigarettes, and hard liquor, but a good pale ale is usually only about 16c for the same kind of bottle we see at home.

Trips by ferry steamer are expensive, too. Even the five-minute journey from Tilbury to Gravesend cost 13s for our small Vauxhall car and 7d for each person in it. There was a free ferry further up the river at Woolwich, however, and a tunnel at Blackwall. Both of these meant driving through a lot of the congested and poorer parts of London, so we chose the shorter route when going from Essex to Kent.

Outside of the really first class establishments in London, meals at the best hotels seldom cost more than $1.35 for lunch or $1.65 for dinner, and you can expect the best of service with it.

When motoring up to the tiny Staffordshire village of King's Bromley (the King was William the Conqueror, but the Bromley is a corruption of an even older Saxon fief) we followed a very detailed route provided by the RAC and crossed the end of the new super highway to replace the A5 route from London to the Midlands. We rounded the statue of John Bunyan in Bedford and came to a really ancient bridge over a river, with alcoves provided for pedestrians. Somewhere further along we passed several gate houses of unseen "stately homes," but never did we catch sight of the mansions themselves.

This is the White Hart Inn in Witham, where Capt. and Mrs. Kingsley stayed. He complains of the lack of central heating, but the discomfort, he adds philisophically, is all part of the adventure.

Stopping briefly in Northampton we visited the Angel Hotel for lunch, but I must confess that I thought this a rather dull town compared to some that we have visited in England.

THE KING'S BROMLEY cousins live in an early 17th century cottage, much added to and renovated, on part of the original Lane estate. (It was Jane Lane who rescued Charles II after the battle of Worcester by dressing him up as her serving woman, and they probably rode down the lane outside this present home). This cousin lent us a cottage that he had up in Wales, so before the foggy season really set in—late November and early December—we went up to Aberdaron, a tiny village at the very end of the Llelyn Peninsula in Caernarvonshire. This is a comfortable six-hour drive on a fine day.

At one part of the A5 route (Roman Watling Street) there were coal mines beneath the surface, and a sign read "Road liable to subsidence. Drive with caution." However, we managed to navigate it without mishap, although one could see that the area around had sunk and the road had recently been repaired.

At Whittington we passed the twin towers of what had once been the gatehouse of an ancient castle, and people were still living there, we saw. Two white swans swam quietly in the moat which bordered the main road.

By this route one skirts Shrewsbury and enters Wales by the valley of the Dee, a truly beautiful valley among rising hills, but here again the road is very narrow, and the little towns slow the traffic to a crawl. Just before Llangollen there is a sign, "Welcome to Wales" and you begin to feel like a world traveller.

Next Week: WALES.